STATEMENT OF
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THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
H.R. 1017, H.R. 1036, H.R. 2504, H.R. 2559, H.R. 2735, H.R. 3073, H.R. 3441 AND DRAFT DISCUSSIONS ON HOMELESSNESS AMONG VETERANS AND GRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY EDUCATION

OCTOBER 01, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity for The American Legion to present its views on the broad list of veterans' legislation being considered by this Committee. The American Legion commends this Committee for holding a hearing to discuss these very important and timely issues.

H.R. 1017, Chiropractic Care Available to All Veterans Act

The purpose of this bill is to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to require the provision of chiropractic care and services to veterans at all Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Centers and to expand access to such care and services.

The American Legion supports this bill as it is an enhancement of an existing benefit provided to veterans.

H.R. 1036, Veterans Physical Therapy Services Improvement Act of 2009

The purpose of this bill is to establish a Director of Physical Therapy Services within VA to ensure these programs have effective oversight and management.

Previously, The American Legion expressed a position supporting the establishment of a Director of Physician Assistant within VA to ensure efficient utilization of the programs and initiatives relating to this field.

The American Legion continues to support the intent of this bill.

H.R. 2504, Increase in Amount Authorized to be Appropriated for Comprehensive Service Programs for Homeless Veterans

Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups (CHALENG) sites continue to report increases in the number of homeless veterans with families (i.e. dependent children) being served by their programs. CHALENG reports that 118 sites (85 percent of all sites) have seen a total of 1,282 homeless veteran families. This was a 24 percent increase over last year's 1,038 homeless veteran families. Homeless veteran service providers recognize that they will have to accommodate the needs of the changing homeless veteran population, which include the increasing numbers of women veterans and veterans with dependents. This bill would increase the funding going to homeless veterans programs that are desperately needed. These programs will assist the homeless veteran community with their rehabilitation, recovery, health, and community integration.

The American Legion fully supports this bill.

H.R. 2559, Help Our Homeless Veterans Act

This bill would direct the Secretary of Veteran Affairs to carry out a national media campaign directed at homeless veterans and veterans at risk of becoming homeless.

This bill would provide outreach to our homeless veterans and those who are at high risk of becoming homeless. This bill would also place a special emphasis on a special subgroup of veterans: women veterans. The number of homeless women veterans has doubled in the past decade, up from 3 percent to 5 percent according to the VA. This increase of women veterans is due to their exposure to combat related situations. With the continuance of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is widely known that psychological illnesses, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and other mental illnesses play a significant role in pushing a certain population of veterans into homelessness. With the enactment of H.R. 2559, these veterans will be targeted and given the proper information that will help them either avoid homelessness or assist them in readjusting from chronic homelessness.

The American Legion supports this bill.

H.R. 2735, Availability of Grant Funds to Service Centers for Personnel

This bill seeks to provide a Service Center for homeless veterans that could be used to provide funding for staffing in order to meet the service availability. This Service Center is essential in providing outreach to the community and will play an integral part in serving the many needs of homeless veterans. This bill seeks to amend section 2012 of title 38, United States Code (U.S.C.) by allowing a Grant and Per Diem award to be considered as matching funds for other grants for which organizations that provide assistance to homeless veterans, may be eligible for. This award will match, in combination with other payments for which they are eligible. Lastly, this bill will provide the maximum amount of financing to organizations that are on the front lines of assisting our most vulnerable veterans.

The American Legion supports this important piece of legislation.

H.R. 3073, Grant Program to Provide Assistance to Veterans at Risk of Becoming Homeless

This bill seeks to establish a grant program to provide assistance to veterans who are at risk of becoming homeless. This grant program would fill a tremendous need for veterans who are looking for assistance before their situations worsen. Approximately 3,000 homeless veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan have been treated at VA Medical Centers. This bill could help veterans and their families to avoid the extraordinary stresses and damages that occur when they become homeless. It could take several years for a veteran to get back on his/her feet and properly reintegrate back into the community. However, this legislation could assist veterans with funds to fill a temporary financial need. With VA and other homeless care service providers continuing to focus on the various needs (i.e., health issues, economic issues, lack of safe, affordable housing, and lack of family and social support networks) of homeless veterans, and the enactment of this legislation, The American Legion believes that homelessness rates will continue to drop among the veteran community. It is vital that homeless veterans receive the care and treatment they so deserve.

The American Legion fully supports this bill.

H.R. 3441, Automatic Enrollment of Veterans Returning from Combat Zones into the VA Medical System

The purpose of this bill is to amend title 38, U.S.C., relating to the automatic enrollment of honorably discharged combat veterans. This bill proposes to do so by enrolling veterans automatically with the VA and providing them with an ID card and full access to the VA medical facilities within their respective geographical areas.

The American Legion recently passed Resolution No. 29, "Improvements to Implement a Seamless Transition," which recognized the gaps in services and has consistently advocated improvements be made to the transition process. H.R. 3441 will assist in assuring veterans are provided with the immediate use of VA facilities, creating a seamless transition from Department of Defense (DoD) to the VA system. The American Legion has noted service members and their families are easily overwhelmed when dealing with the bureaucracy of multiple departments, but with the passage of H.R. 3441, service members and veterans will be provided with timely, accessible care within VA.

H.R. 3441 also provides the service member an option to not seek VA enrollment at the time of discharge and The American Legion is concerned that service members may reject enrollment and perhaps slip through the cracks during and after their transition from DoD to the VA system.

The American Legion fully supports H.R. 3441 and its efforts to improve coordination between DoD and VA during the seamless transition process of wounded service members and veterans.

Draft Discussions on Homelessness Among Veterans

This bill seeks to amend title 38, U.S.C., to improve per diem grants payments for organizations assisting homeless veterans.

This bill would increase the current rate of $33 per bed to $60 per bed to assist in the care and treatment of homeless veterans. The homeless veteran needs counseling, health care, job training, and affordable housing in order to properly reintegrate into the community. This increase in funding will allow the homeless care providers to better serve these homeless so they can become physically, emotionally, and financially capable of sustaining themselves.

The American Legion supports this bill.

Draft Discussions on Graduate Psychology Education Transfer of Funds to Secretary of Health and Human Services for Graduate Psychology Education Program

The purpose of this bill is to transfer $5 million from accounts of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services for graduate psychology education program. This bill supports the training of psychologists in the treatment of veterans with PTSD, TBI and other combat-related disorders and gives preference to VA health care facilities and graduate programs affiliated with the VA.

The American Legion approved Resolution No. 150, "The American Legion Policy on Department of Veterans Affairs Mental Health Services," which urges Congress to annually appropriate sufficient funds to VA to ensure comprehensive mental health services are available to veterans. The American Legion believes funding must be appropriated to treat the invisible wounds of war.

The American Legion has supported VA's strong commitment to Medical and Nursing School Affiliations to recruit and retain high quality medical specialists. However, we do not have an official position on an affinity relationship between the training of VA psychologists through the Department of Health and Human Services.

GPD Surplus Fix Draft Bill

This draft bill would amend title 38, U.S.C., to direct the Secretary of Veteran Affairs to eliminate the required reduction in the amount of per diem payments provided to entities furnishing services to homeless veterans to account for other sources of income.

This bill would allow homeless care providers who may end up with some surplus at the end of the fiscal year, due to the receiving other sources of income, the authorization to keep this surplus. This would allow these homeless care providers to use these leftover monies for continued services for their homeless veteran population in the upcoming fiscal year.

The American Legion supports this bill.

HUD-VASH Draft Bill

This draft bill seeks to reform and expand the Veteran Affairs Supportive Housing Program carried out by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Veteran Affairs.

Homeless veteran service providers recognized that they will have to accommodate the needs of the changing homeless veteran population, including increasing numbers of women and veterans with dependents. Access to family housing through the distribution of the thousands of new section 8 vouchers that have been made available through the Housing and Urban Development—Veterans Affairs Supported Housing (HUD-VASH) program, which offers an important new resource allowing VA staff to assist the veteran and their family. HUD-VASH program was established in 1992, where HUD and housing and VA provided case management to homeless veterans. VA's services are designed to improve the veteran's physical and mental health, and enhance the veteran's ability to live in safe and affordable permanent housing in the community of his/her choosing. Less than 1,000 units were available in 2006. Public Law 110-161, enacted December 26, 2007, provided funding for 10,000 new vouchers for homeless veterans and their families. In March 2009, Congress funded an additional 10,000 vouchers. This legislation would help ensure that more homeless veterans receive permanent housing through the supportive housing program and provide more training for HUD and VA personnel to improve the effectiveness of the program. In addition, this bill instructs VA to outreach to landlords to encourage and facilitate participation in this program. With the reform and expansion of HUD-VASH, homeless veterans will be able to continue on their path to health, fulfillment and reintegration back into mainstream society.

The American Legion fully supports this legislation.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman for allowing The American Legion this opportunity to present its views on the aforementioned issues. We look forward to working with the Committee to help increase and improve access to quality care for our nation's veterans.